

said: "The Prison Service had been notified of the conditions that the General Medical Council had set on Dr Singh practising. He appears to have been unsupervised when practising within the prison service." The GMC's restrictions were not mentioned at the inquest into the death of Mr Wright.

Owen Dyer *London*

Researchers identify gene associated with asthma

A joint US and UK consortium of researchers has identified a gene associated with airways remodelling in asthma, which offers a potential new target for developing drugs that can prevent changes in lung tissue that result in hyper-responsiveness.

The researchers performed a genome-wide scan on 460 white families with "sib-pairs" (children having the same biological parents) diagnosed with asthma and being treated for the condition. They identified a locus on chromosome 20p13 that was linked to asthma (log10 of the likelihood ratio 2.94) and bronchial hyper-responsiveness (3.93).

The gene—ADAM33 (a disintegrin and metalloprotease)—was found to be significantly associated with asthma, a range of linkage analyses; including case-control, transmission, disequilibrium, and haplotype analyses, was used. The findings were published on 10 July on *Nature's* advance online publication (www.nature.com/nature).

Stephen Holgate, Medical Research Council professor of medicine at the University of Southampton and leader of the research group, said: "This is really exciting. ADAM33 is the first major novel gene from a whole genome scan to be identified as being a key component in asthma."

Professor Holgate suggested that the identification of ADAM33 had important implications for developing new ways of treating asthma. Cur-

rent treatments for asthma target the allergic component of asthma or dilate constricted airways, but it may be possible to develop therapies targeted at ADAM33 and its products to prevent the onset of airways remodelling even if the allergic component of asthma is present.

"Eventually it might be possible to screen infants for mutations in the gene, to identify those at risk of developing asthma—and then institute preventive measures to stop the gene being switched on," Professor Holgate proposed.

Susan Mayor *London*

Chancellor maps out three year public service spending plans

More than 40% of the UK government's public spending increase will go to the NHS and social services, Chancellor Gordon Brown announced this week.

But Mr Brown's spending review, which set out plans for 2003-6, gave no detail on how the extra money pledged for health will be spent.

Details have yet to be finalised, but the review says that the current formula for distributing resources is under review and should be available in the autumn, for use from April 2003. Reducing health inequalities will be a "key criterion" in the new formula, it says.

Of the extra £61bn (\$96bn; €95bn a year pledged for public services by 2005-6, nearly a quarter (23%) will go to education, Mr Brown said. Transport and housing will get 9% of the increase, with 7% set aside for defence and international development.

Although health and social services takes the lion's share of the increase (41%), Mr Brown said that extra resources must be tied to "reform and results."

Rebecca Coombes *London*

Opportunity and Security for All: Investing in an Enterprising, Fairer Britain is available at www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/Spending_Review

Pfizer buys Pharmacia for \$60bn

Claire McKenna *BMJ*

Pfizer has strengthened its position as the world's leading pharmaceutical company with the announcement that it is to acquire Pharmacia, a smaller rival company, for \$60bn (£38bn; €60bn).

The merger is set to create a firm with 10% of the market share and an estimated revenue in 2002 of about \$48bn. This will be almost double that of closest rival GlaxoSmithKline, which was recently speculated to be in merger talks with Bristol-Myers Squibb, a deal that could create a firm to rival Pfizer-Pharmacia.

Pfizer will gain several best-selling products under the deal, including celecoxib (Celebrex), the arthritis treatment which was the most successful pharma-

ceutical launch ever when it was introduced with Pharmacia in 1999. Pharmacia also makes the hair treatment Regaine (minoxidil) and the treatment for growth hormone deficiency Genotropin (somatropin). Pfizer also makes the anti-impotence drug Viagra (sildenafil).

The merger between Pfizer and Pharmacia would propel the new firm to the top of the market in the European sector, although it is yet to be approved by competition regulators. The acquisition announcement came as Pfizer reported a 10% increase in net income in the second quarter to \$2.1bn. The research and development spend of Pfizer-Pharmacia will be about \$7bn this year. □

Candidate for US surgeon general comes under fire from senators

Scott Gottlieb *New York*

The White House nominee for US surgeon general faced tough questioning in Senate hearings about his qualifications but is still expected to be confirmed.

Dr Richard Carmona hit the headlines for his dual career as a trauma surgeon and deputy sheriff, and on the eve of the hearings allegations arose in the *Los Angeles Times* that he had had a rocky tenure as a surgeon at a previous hospital and was often in conflict with colleagues. The article also alleged he had supplied incorrect information for an application to become an emergency room physician and had failed certification exams at least twice.

Dr Carmona, who describes himself as a "high school dropout and poor Hispanic kid" who went on to become a doctor after serving in Vietnam, has run a trauma unit and hospital in Tucson, Arizona, where he works as a deputy sheriff. He is also a clinical professor of surgery at the University of Arizona.

Under questioning at his Senate confirmation hearing, Dr Carmona acknowledged that it had taken him eight years to acquire board certification in general



Doctor Richard Carmona (right) with President Bush

surgery and that he had failed the exam twice before passing it. He also dismissed complaints about his handling of several personnel disputes, attributing these to bitter former employees and "business disputes."

Despite the questions, several senators predicted that Dr Carmona would be confirmed for the post vacated in April by David Satcher, who was appointed by Bill Clinton in 1998.

During the hearing Dr Carmona demonstrated a fluent understanding of a wide array of health issues, ranging from asthma to bioterrorism, to childhood obesity, and to HIV/AIDS. □